

An abstract of the thesis "T. S. Eliot and Myth"

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This thesis discusses how T. S. Eliot uses myth in his work, with recourse to some characteristics of myth. Special emphasis is put on *The Waste Land* and the mythical method.

Mythical elements are to be found not only in *The Waste Land* but also in Eliot's other early poems. In "Mr. Apollinax" he depicts the protagonist by means of images of various mythical figures—Priapus, a centaur's hoofs, Apollo, Apollyon—in order to show the superhuman impression of Mr. Apollinax. Likewise, in "Sweeney Erect" the characters are regarded as mythical figures, that is, "The epileptic [woman] on the bed" is compared to Nausicaa, and Sweeney to Polypheme, a monster, in the place of Odysseus, who left Nausicaa in the Greek myth. In "Sweeney among the Nightingales" the protagonist's fate is symbolized by the episode of the murder of Agamemnon. Sweeney's illicit or sterile intercourse is compared to the dishonorable death of Agamemnon by reference to the episode of Philomela. It is a common factor in these poems that the present world is connected with the mythical world in some form or another.

It is apparent that Eliot uses or intends to use the mythical method in his *The Waste Land*, for in it he deals with "the immense panorama of

futility and anarchy which is contemporary history⁶⁾ by manipulating a parallel between the present and the past by means of myth. The mythical method in *The Waste Land* serves two purposes. One purpose is to criticize the society of Eliot's times by comparing it with the past, and the other is to transcend time, though these two purposes are not necessarily separable from each other, for the mythical method is to provide the present with a framework taken from the past, and hence closely concerns transcending time. According to Eliot himself, the mythical method has been made possible by psychology, ethnology, and *The Golden Bough*; therefore the two purposes in *The Waste Land* are achieved with the help of these things.

What is the effect of the use of myth to describe parallels with the contemporary world? The key to the solution of this problem lies in the nature of myth. The ethnology and anthropology of the twentieth century have changed the conception of myth, that is, myth has come to be regarded as real or true to those who live in the societies where it is a living force, while it was considered as a fable, an invention or a fiction in the nineteenth century. From the psychological viewpoint C. G. Jung regards myths as revelations of what he calls the "collective unconscious," which contains the common inherited cultural experiences of the particular social group to which a man belongs. In *The Golden Bough* J. G. Frazer attempts to make clear why people worshiped Osiris, Adonis and so on, in terms of the rituals concerning these gods, and gives some reality to the myths concerning them. It follows that myth represents the perceived realities of the past, or was believed to be true. Therefore, compared with such myth, each description of an everyday situation which seems to have no special meaning, comes to have some significance in *The Waste Land*.

In *The Waste Land* Eliot attempts to criticize the contemporary world in two ways, by contrasting the present with the past and by showing the continuity of the past with the present. The contrast is to be seen in the last stanza of "The Burial of the Dead" and in "Death by Water." Eliot reveals the depravity of present-day Christianity by comparing it with the ancient pagan myth of Osiris in the former and with that of

Adonis in the latter. The qualitative equality is to be seen in the description of the room of a woman like Cleopatra in "The Game of Chess," and in that of two youths—a small house agent's clerk with carbuncles and a typist woman—in "The Fire Sermon." Each of these descriptions, given the message of the myth of Philomela in the former and that of Tiresias in the latter, reveals the moral corruption, especially the sexual corruption, of all times, that is, that sexual corruption originates not in the present but in the past.

The mythical method of moving the past into parallel with the present requires one to find the past in the present situations. That is, the mythical method depends on transcending time. According to the anthropologist Mircea Eliade, myth itself has the ability to transcend time; in other words, a member of archaic society, by recollecting or re-enacting myths, is able to enter "a 'sacred' Time at once primordial and indefinitely recoverable."⁽²⁾ Thus Eliot may well move myth into parallel with the contemporary world. As we can see in *The Waste Land* as well as in his early poems, Eliot has the ability to discover the past in the present. He attempts, in *The Waste Land*, to apprehend the higher reality of the contemporary world through the mystic experience of transcending time.

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(1) T.S.Eliot, *Selected Prose of T.S.Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p.177.

(2) Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R.Trask (New York: Harper and Row, c1963), p.18.